

Number One

2007

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About Number One

Number One is a small community (unincorporated) two miles west of Gallatin, Tennessee, on the Nashville Pike (Highway 31E). No one knows exactly how it got its name. Though local theories and legends point to several origins, the prevailing notion is that Number One was not much more than a dot on the Cumberland Trail.

Nearby Station Camp Creek, an early trading post for 18th and early 19th century long rifle hunters, suggests that Number One may have been the name given to a designated hunting ground or a rendezvous point for traders. Perhaps the name originated in the early school system or in the railroad lingo of the Louisville–Nashville line, which runs parallel to the Pike.

Most people believe, however, that the name is older than the school system, older than the railroads, perhaps even older than Trail itself. Number One remains a mystery, a name with many possible histories and meanings—an appropriate symbol, don't you think?—for literature and for our journal.

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Featuring

2007 Poetry and Prose Contest Winners

“Storm Damages”
by Greg Camp

“With a New Tongue Spoken”
by Mandy Haynes

&

Author

Dan Powers

Storm Damages

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would that thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

—Revelation 3:15-16

I would rather have you fill with fire
Or shrink behind a veil of frozen eyes
Than turn and turn yourself like spooling wire.

Though mingled gusts may lofty ends desire,
They breathe the wrathful wind of compromise.
I would rather have you fill with fire.

Better to blow across a winded lyre,
To play your spirit's tune and seek the skies,
Than turn and turn yourself like spooling wire.

Though sparks can by a second's flash inspire,
And lightning's flame is brief, and then it dies,
I would rather have you fill with fire.

Though ice and death do seemingly conspire,
Better to feel you join the coldly wise
Than turn and turn yourself like spooling wire.

I would have your chilly heart retire
Before deceiving beats make passion rise,
Or I would rather have you fill with fire
Than turn and turn yourself like spooling wire.

With a New Tongue Spoken

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. —Mark 16:17-18

Sometimes my aunt was just too weird, even for me. Like the time the big Pentecostal revival came through town.

There were posters and flyers all over town reading “Calling all Preachers and Ministers . . .” In my mind I could just picture a bunch of preachers in all different sizes and shapes dressed in tails and top hats. “Welcome to the Greatest Show on Earth. This here is Ernie — the fastest preach in the South. Step on up, ladies and gentlemen and be blown away by our fat lady on the piano.” I could just see her, all five hundred pounds of her, dressed in a big flowery dress and big floppy hat. Circles of pink rouge on her white cheeks.

I couldn’t wait—would the choir be a group of acrobats? Would someone be juggling hymnbooks? Would there be cotton candy and popcorn?

Cory was not a religious person at all—she was spiritual, but not religious. She sort of made it up as she went along. Basically be a good person and God (or whoever) would be happy with you and all would be right with the world. It worked for her. It worked for me too. My mama would not have approved, but I didn’t dwell on that too much.

Anyway, she got all excited when she heard that there would be serpent handlers. She was fascinated by the whole thing and said she just had to see it for herself. She had painted a picture once; it was awesome, of a girl and a big snake. The girl was nude and the snake was wrapped round her covering the bits and pieces that would have made me stare if they weren’t covered up. I couldn’t help it—my imagination is way overactive. I would try to place everyone I knew in the picture—how can there be so many types of boobs anyway? Isn’t it funny?

Back to the story. That was one of my aunt's favorite pictures, and we kept it hanging over the fireplace in the living room for a long time. Then someone offered her a price she couldn't refuse (we had gotten down to rolling our pennies) and she sold it. I asked her if she was going to paint another one and she said she didn't think she could. I was disappointed, but soon she painted another favorite and then another, so I wasn't sad for long, but I've never forgotten it.

So the anticipated night came and two of us marched on down to the big white tent that had been constructed for the revival. It was pretty cool; I did feel like I was going to some kind of carnival or something. There were lots of people there, people I had never seen. I just assumed they traveled with the circus, um, revival; it never crossed my mind that people from surrounding towns would come. It was exciting. There was a lot of commotion going on around us. A lot of amen's and halleluiahs and stuff like that. There were some people talking in tongues; at the time I didn't know what it was so I was a little frightened. A few people fell out, literally, right in the middle of the aisles. It was very exciting. I could feel something in the air.

My aunt took my hand and gave it a squeeze. I looked up at her and she was smiling down at me.

"This is a little different than your regular Sunday school class, huh, Chickpea?" she giggled.

I went almost every Sunday, because I know that my mama would have wanted me to, and I did like it. It was something constant and steady in my life. Everybody needs a little bit of that, don't you think? Whatever it might be. Though, the older I became, I left with more questions than answers. The only answer I seemed to get from my Sunday school teachers was that I asked too many questions for someone my age. Aunt Cory wasn't much help either—she had a bumper sticker that read "Eve Was Framed." So as you can imagine, I had a lot of questions.

So through all the commotion going on around us, we saw a man up front holding some mean poisonous-looking snake. He actually had two of them and was holding one up over his head. It was so weird, I don't know if I can really describe it. This man looked crazy and perfectly sane all at the same

time. He was sweating, but seemed to be cool as a cucumber. Cory watched him, and I watched her watching him, and I knew that something was happening. She stood up, squeezed my hand hard, and walked down the middle of the aisle, stepping over people as she went. She never took her eyes off the snake he was holding over his head. She walked up to the first row of pews and stopped. She was clenching and unclenching her fists, but I couldn't see her face.

The man noticed her and they stared at each other without speaking. Cory took a couple of steps closer and the man danced a little jig. He started smiling at her and Cory stepped even closer.

I felt like I was in a dream—it looked like Cory was talking to the snake, but her mouth wasn't actually moving. The snake was staring right at her. I got up and walked down the aisle as close as I dared. There were some weird smells, I tell you. I won't even try to describe them—I don't think I could. I could only watch and wonder what I would do if I lost my aunt to a snakebite — would they (whoever they were) let me stay at Kim's house?

The man held the snake out to her and I swear she took it. She just reached out and took it. She held the snake's head between her thumb and middle finger. She held it up to her face and looked into its eyes. For one moment I was sure that it had hypnotized her.

I could see her face and I could smell the fear coming off of her in waves. It smelled strange, like vinegar and lemon and something else. But it was her fear, I am sure of it coming up and over all the other smells around me. She stared that snake down. Then she smiled at it and said, "Fuck you."

I almost died from the thrill of it — we were in a church for crying out loud, even if it was a tent and the fat lady was banging away on the piano. Thank goodness she was banging away, because I don't think that the crazy man with the snakes could hear my aunt with all the racket going on around us.

She handed the snake back to the handler without one single bite, thank God. He took it from her and I realized her hands were shaking something terrible.

Someone called out in a frantic voice, “That was God talking to you, honey!!! Did you hear? Did you listen?”

Cory turned to where the voice was coming from and said, “Oh, no — that wasn’t God that was talking to me. No ma’am, nowhere close to God. And, no I didn’t listen.” She threw her head back and laughed and I watched as the color came back to her cheeks. She had gotten pale as a ghost.

“You ready to get out of here?” I nodded and she took my sweaty, shaking hand in her sweaty shaking hand. We walked past all those funny religious people and out of the tent.

“Cory, were you really talking to that snake?” I waited as long as I could, about five seconds.

“Him? Oh yeah, he was an old boyfriend of mine. He was a snake back then, too. I had something I had to tell him. I never got the chance back then.” She was looking up at the moon. I couldn’t tell if she was serious, crazy or just full of shit. She was like that a lot and I hardly ever knew which one for sure. I spent a lot of the time wondering if she was pulling my leg. She put her arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze, so I dropped it. If she had gone completely nuts, I didn’t want to know.

So, I waited as long as I could, about sixty seconds, and asked, “How did you know he was going to be here?” I just couldn’t resist.

“I didn’t,” she said, and for one second she looked as confused as I felt. Then she laughed her big, loud, easy laugh and we walked the rest of the way home in silence.

Sunbonnet Girls

They were intended for a quilt. Two dozen
Sunbonnet girls appliquéd on 9 inch muslin squares,
my grandmother's handiwork that made its way
in a battered trunk from Texas to California to
Queens, to the wire-chained lockers of the basement
below the apartment we all shared until she died,
disoriented at Bellevue, her heart in a fray.

Sunbonnet girls don't have faces, necks, or shoulders.
but each girl has a club of an arm, showing purpose,
broad face-hiding bonnets for modesty,
flared gowns for a suggestion of whimsy,
and black Dutch shoes in profile, for work.
She loved pretty colors, and made her bonnets
of solid yellows, reds, blues, and greens, embroidered
with dot-and-dash daisies chain-stitched in jolly hatbands;
the gowns were wide wedges of tender floral,
calico and gingham from dresses and curtains.
The bonnets, gowns, arms and shoes
were basted in place, then blanket-stitched
with bright flosses chosen from tangled skeins
in her sewing box, out of which Coats & Clark's
black and gold paper bands showered. I see her now,
addressing thread to needle eye and squinting it on through.

I've taken her finished squares and made this quilt
and know if she could, she would rip it apart
and restitch it beautifully while I sleep, as she did
the wedding dress I thought I could sew myself.
Did she think my marriage would unravel if
she didn't tidy up the seams, make the hem invisible?

And she hated those black boat-like shoes. Maybe they reminded her of the orthopedic shoes she wore to work, standing all day cutting fabric. They were called *Space shoes*, made from impressions taken of her weary flat feet. Why didn't she give the sunbonnet girls pretty pumps and laces? Because she was loyal to the patterns, as she had been loyal to a drunk, loyal to the daughter she raised despite him, loyal to her daughter's daughter, whose childish hems and seams she forgave with each corrective stitch.

I Sit Here Waiting

I sit here waiting for a poem
I've promised a poem to...
a poem has promised me to
come I sit here waiting
for a poem because I want
to give it away it is like waiting
for a bird to make a tangled nest in my hair
and lay an egg so I can steal it I sit here
waiting when I need
to be doing things "Do us! Do us!"
needy things that want to be done while the poem
waits, shy in a dark corner under the bed
fearful of all the urgent wanting

The Foal

The foal,
A rangy, bony, skinny
Pinto.
Has no fear, yet, of humans.
Her mother gives me permission
To touch her child.
She knows me.
She prods the foal to me with her own muzzle
Her eyes shine
She is watchful
But teaching trust.
Someday the child will learn the rules
The feel of leather
The gee and haw of orders,
But for now, it is enough
Just to learn
Trust,
And to believe in it.
For a while.

Snow

the way a child likes snow

—Wallace Stevens

Snowbound, bundled in heavy coats
and gloves, we light the camp stove
on the porch to make coffee.

Accustomed to the speed of instant
perk, we shiver while we wait for
the slow boil. *Remember how much
fun snow used to be, you say.*

I think of the time before I knew your
face, your name, your touch. In the
Oklahoma photographs, I see you
playing in the snow with your brothers.
In my favorite, you sit inside a hoop,
older brothers your mainstays. Dust
storms set you winding from Oklahoma
to Tennessee, Pop trading washing
machines for hams, fryers, roasting
ears, tomatoes, and the occasional cash.

While you were meandering about like
a tumbleweed, my sisters and I were
screaming down a Tennessee hill on a
homemade sled, dodging boulders.

Now we huddle on this frosty porch,
snowbound, an aging couple, but still
wide-eyed kids hurtling down a stony hill,
in our throats, screams of joy and terror.

He Took to His Bed

“My bootlegger father believed,”
Hyman reminisces over lunch,
“that if I, as kid of no more than ten,
lugged the gallon jugs on deliveries,
no one would know it was bathtub
whiskey we were dropping off.

“He was so bad at the business
we moved to smaller and smaller
apartments, when all the world
was dying for an honest drink.
In his head, still in the Old Country,
studying Torah, Talmud.

“And when Prohibition died
like a whipped cart horse,
we lived on the handouts of relatives,
who eventually grew tired of a man
defeated by America, the family
just about printing its own money.

“He made us speak Yiddish in the house,”
Hyman reflects, “Rochester a sojourn
in the Twenties’ wilderness,
before we’d head home, triumphant
to Germany and his book-lined study.

“Thank God he was wrong.”

Isn't It Good

Isn't it good
To go into your bedroom
On a Sunday afternoon
And watch a black and white B movie
On an old TV set from 1952,
Knowing that a woman
Is somewhere in the house, quiet,
Maybe slumped over in an easy chair
Nodding, not thinking about much,
Not even you;
And it's after dinner
When the leftovers have cooled
On the back eye
Or have been put away
At the back of the refrigerator,
Because love has a quiet ring
That makes the soul serene,
Not bright colors
And that quick trick camera thing;
For Love grants the right to be alone, numb,
And sometimes,
Just downright dumb.

Planting Iris

Grief should squat in the petunias
 like a toad
while you separate root stock
 left in a paper sack
by your mother. June,
 the wrong time, she would warn,
to plant iris,
 but it won't get done
hidden in a dark corner
 of the basement.
She'll still be dead.

 So the toad waits patiently
in the petunias, proud
 of its blemishes and bumps.
If you cradle it in your hands
 it will pee, causing warts
your mother warned—just like
 the ones you had when
you were a boy.

 So you stare into
the little Buddha's eyes
 until they blink.
By August the iris will
 sprout green kitten ears.
This year they won't bloom.

Bamboo Plants

Bamboo plants in a front window
rooted stems, stale water, wine-dark bowl.
They were languishing at summer's end, destined
for the compost heap
but then the light changed.
Autumn brings sun directly to their window;
Bright new shoots presume into the air.

Our cat is migrant all day, in pursuit
of sunlit doorways, east-facing in the morning
west-facing in the afternoon. He basks
in this therapy as he will sprawl over a heating vent
in the winter months to come. He studies
the moving scenery, saunters along
after the bright places.

I heard a poet say, "What does it matter?" about
his work in progress when he learned
of his cancer. Just like that, the light
shifted, abandoned him. But then
I heard he had gotten up
and moved along with his star as it
traversed his spare economy.

An old husband pats his old wife with affection.
The light catches their moist eyes.
Just by virtue of being together,
they draw a brightness to themselves.

Heirloom

Mama places the package in my hands.
Wrapped. Unlike things she has given
me before, portioning out keepsakes—
pitchers, teapots, chests, baskets, jars—
to the four of us before we sell her house.

You're her namesake, she says.

Firstborn. This is yours.

It's the last quilt
my great-grandmother made,
Friendship Star:
dark squares and triangles,
remnants of her dresses,
sunbonnets, dust caps, aprons;
bright reds, blues, pinks,
remnants of my mother's dresses,
mother the only female offspring
for two generations.

In her younger years,
Granny had corded wool,
spun cotton,
wove homespun.
She was a gifted seamstress,
tattling lace,
knitting afghans and socks,
making cutwork tablecloths,
all my childhood dresses
adorned with her fancy buttonholes.
Granny's Friendship Star
graces a quilt stand at the foot of my bed.
As I lie waiting for sleep,
I envision generations of women
gathered around quilt frames,
needles plying divers stars.

When Mars Comes By

Every once in awhile Mars comes by,
blinks red incessant in the open envelope called the sky
it used to be more fun down here
in the mud and blood and shuddering pines
and other forest kings,
but now we're stuck like death
hung on a chainlink fence
beaten with sticks and left like Matthew Shepard,
pariah laid out to dry,
and with our sticks cut from regal pine do we picket the war god;
bring us rain, let fall wine, and ambrosia nectar very fine
but slowly we move to the side,
He gives us not a sign,
stays merely a blinking eye,
and as I move to the side
away from the gathered mass who pray,
I pass by the flowers which once stood healthy and firm,
now hang limp and pale,
pastel,
and fresh laundry chemical scent the air,
and I wish there was not an omnipotent red eye,
gazing into mine,
or at least that all men had been born blind.

Semblances

Deep, deep down in the flesh,
ground in like work dirt,

the hours, the days are
seasoned by the seasons.

Winter damp and summer haze
hold light by their pins

or the drift of lank clouds.
Even beyond distant ridges

a dull cast to the skyline
seems hymnlike and doleful

to old eyes and tight lips.
There on the exigent land,

so rapine, so baldly exposed,
the hills are null of timber,

the mountainsides wracked
by dark scars, once dealers

had peddled the wood and coal.
Still the old people exist

to tend the wounds like dreams,
paid for by their calluses.

At the river bend, shrouded
in ghostly mists, are images

of the young people, coming on.
Then, drifting, they are gone

like a hurtful rasp of breath.
And memories like footsteps

down a dark corridor echo —
rising, drifting to silence.

Dreams of Paducah

—for *Noris*

Back home, sitting on the porch, cars
like speed boats buzzing in both directions,
I reflect on our day. Images float past like cargo
on a barge, dreams through a long night of fever.

. . .

We began the day with coffee, poetry and the clarity
of crows: yes, no; yes, no. They flock at the water's
edge, make their plans to bare the heart, to pick it
clean of regret and hope. This is their gift, ready
or not, they open the soul for dreams.

I see you standing in a large room, yellow walls
and space. You are talking with a black man about
Haiti and about Heaven and about Dominican.
I drift by jars of roasted coffee beans, black, jumbled,
impenetrable. You are an apparition, or is it I
who am the ghost?

We enter the funeral home where I don't want
to go, where I don't want to risk waking the dead
or their helpers, and it is cool and dark and welcoming
and the fine grain of pews and doors has been polished
to a state of grace. There are ghosts, but they don't
disturb me; it is you who discovers *this* is the place
to which you will come. Knowing that, we pass
temporarily back into the world of brightness.

We sit before the wide river. It is late and warm.
We have walked much. I have felt your hand,
seen your bare foot in the green waters, heard the wake
of boats lap against the shore long after they pass.
The river cools our thoughts. Our words don't matter,
they drift down the stream of language, into the ocean
of thoughts, and pass quietly into the long night.

. . .

A truck rumbles by and I am awakened. It is hot,
the night is dark, I am here,
the day will come, another dream.

In Memory of the Body Donors

10. Skull

and what could death be but a skull?
(this is a test, don't answer)

children love it
we're so casual about it

the pirate's crossbones?
Are they humerus or femur?
(you wear them on your hat
you don't even know their name)

little boy
rubber cutlass in your teeth
eyepatch
black hair
white bones

your skin stretched pale
little river veins
arch over your skull
under that trivial white-blonde hair

I think that the worst thing
is the flesh
falling away
from the teeth

you see that
in all
the best monsters

(and you, my hungry soldier—
whose knuckle-bones
did you toss at the foot of the cross?)

Finery

How am I
to understand
the clouds this day

a crinoline canopy
of pinks and grays

cumulus lapped
by long strokes
of departing sun

heedless
of the five o'clock whistle
and rising to rain—

a sublime couturier
(may god have mercy)
that launders a reluctant city?

Suzy Q

If when we are all sleeping
and only the moon
is watching, —
If she on her unicycle
balances towards the stairs
as cigarette smoke
inhales down after
sleeping pills and cough syrup,
and she declares out loud:
“I am happy! I am happy!
I have never been
so utterly happy!” —
If she lays her naked body
in silence and darkness
upon the cold floor
as the soft, crescent glow
tells of her curves and bruises,
and she whispers to herself:
“Everything is beautiful:
and nothing hurts.” —

Who will say she is not
deserving of your envy?

Melantho, One of Penelope's Serving Wenches: Ithaca

"Life goes on," I longed to tell the mistress.
"So, better to spend your sap, then miser it
for a hero who might never come home."
But I'd have been beaten, whipped, and turned out.
Still, it took too much effort to listen
to her go on and on about how good
a man, how fair a lord, how wise a ruler,
how loving a husband Odysseus was.

No wonder I took up with the suitors,
who knew how to laugh and could coax giggles
from me with their clever hands, cunning mouths,
and wicked poles I couldn't get hold of,
while they feasted on Lady Penelope's
flocks and herds, trying to force her to decide.

But she was cleverer than them, weaving
her father-in-law's death-shroud by day,
removing the stitches by night, until
I told Eurymachos, my special friend,
who gave me a coin for betraying her.
If my man had won her Icy Highness,
I'd have been his gift-pampered concubine.

But he was the second one to be killed
by that murderous brute Odysseus,
who, by some trick of the gods, doesn't look
a day older than when I watched him leave:
hiding behind my mother's robe, holding
my tiny girl's breath at his fearsome face.

Butchering the suitors wasn't enough
for that bloodthirsty bastard: us wenches
will be hanged like magpies, someone whispers;
our sentence for daring to find some joy
in this one life begrudged to serving girls.

Apologia for Missing Cousin Willie's Burial

A race that gives suck to the maimed and crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it.

—Cormac McCarthy

Nothing to forgive now, and forgetting's easily done. No services, no funeral home, straight to the plot. They "planted" you — a favorite phrase of my father, who calls to lay out the common details— on Wednesday before Thanksgiving, and no one knows why they waited three days. Maybe so kin could cipher the odd Christian names the obit wore like a stiff suit and figure was it really you. It was.

Alive, you scurried and scrounged for nowhere— a forensic rotation of rape, robbery, bungled murder, state and private addresses, somehow lasting to 69, forever for our clan. Dad surprised at how many of the kids showed, even Berniece, crying, who hadn't acknowledged her brother in years. Small wonder though he hadn't known the cemetery— nearly to the Larue line, down a thin neck of Turkey Hollow at the poisoned end.

And my father, natural storyteller and our last one, parceling out the sad facts that we laugh about: body delivered by mini-van, in a plyboard box sprayed silver. The top lifted for any of the family who cared to see: there was Willie, head back, toothless mouth agape, pate the size of perhaps a large citrus. The mottled crowd quiet and cold at the site, but stepping away when a tractor growled in to cut the hole.

Clear-cut

no angels here just crows
coughing the only song
they know cacophony

fitting for this foreign
landscape of skidder scars
gullies and nakedness

no songbirds just oily
black scavengers picking
clean this high ridge ribcage

perching on dismembered
limbs tossed in heaps to wait
for witches who read bones

no canopy halo
to break the fall of rain
drowning creeks brown with silt

unholy ghosts appear
hovering tongues of mist
crown stumps that once were trees

coat of many colors
replaced with infant pine
crowded loblolly greed

the drab green of money
the only tune they know
no angels here just crows

Summer Storm

The fir with forty years
and forty feet of knowing
in its trunk still imagines
winter, holding between
needles of a single bough
waterdrops that in January
would be a burden of ice.

Overrun gutters that spill
rivulets of rain imagine
strings of glassine beads
laid clumsily on a table edge,
that pull themselves orderly
to a rackety pool below,
rattling like a sack of marbles.

The watcher first imagines
safety until the hammer
of thunder makes him blink,
a shiver of lightning raises
hair on his arm, then it's ocean
mist driven by gale
where he sits too near the edge.

But the redbird—his tuft
parted by a raindrop—waits
patient in evergreen sanctum
for the storm to pass
and he can peck alone
at sunflower seeds, no longer
imagining anything at all.

Peach Orchard

Still, I hear the flatbed truck
Rumbling down the road before sunup,
Waking me to the chatter of strong-shouldered
Men with loose shirts smelling of Borax,
The high-pitched voices of girls waiting,
Crowded together for the pick-up.

Mama will call us soon to get about
The yard work when it's light enough
To hitch out the cow in the high dewy grass
That stings the ankle sores
That never heal all summer.

The chickens are to be fed,
The hog sloped with the leftovers;
The old dog covered with ticks
Will wag his tail expecting a handout;
The kittens will cower underneath the barn.

And when the sun's too hot,
We young ones will play under the wild
Cherry tree, getting drunk on the berries,
Press our feet into the dry dirt
Until the sun moves beyond us,
And the shade disappears into evening.

It will be time to gather things in,
Latching up for night—
The time for washing feet,
To listen for the old truck coughing
Out of the distance on quiet wheels,
Bringing folks back from the orchards,
Ashy folks, their faces
Stinging from peach fuzz.

Seoul

The brass let us loose in
South Korea
With a pass
For the week.

Most gravitated
To the whore clubs—
Got zombified
On rice whiskey,
Or to the streets smacking
The buns of
Tae Kwon Do master's
Girlfriend:
Yeah, they “got some,”
Alright.

They went shopping for tail
In the red-light towns
For robes and scrolls
At the cheap stands
And a 10-dollar
Pair of Nikes
Near the furry confines
Of the Army base.

It was shameful to see fellow
Americans—American soldiers
At that
Playing the role
Of the vile and drunken
Jackass tourist
For an entire
Country:
An “Army of one”
Was more like
An Army of
Assholes.

But
One of them
Was different.

One of them stood
On a hill
At the apex
Of the city looking down into
Mysticism.

He followed that abstract haze
In search of
Strange new places and
Strange new hearts.

He got lost on purpose through
Foreign corridors without
Language, with only
The outward notion of his soul
To communicate with.

He ate chancy foods, drank
Poison beer and even
Blushed the cheeks of a real
Native woman or two—
Not some
Gutter skank.

He saw:

Mounds of dead dry frogs
Sold on sidewalks:
Alien sea creatures swimming in tanks
At the outdoor markets:
An ocean that more closely resembled
A diseased swimming pool:
The aromatic fusion of seaweed, sewage,
and rotten water:

All the people slim and smiling:
Traffic jams putting L.A. to shame
Without a hint of rage or despair:
Huge bowls of delectable Ramen

spiced to the gills and steaming:
Yakemandu in soy sauce:
Kimchee and Bulgogi strips pulled
hot and sweet with chopsticks
From the grill at your table:
The total surreality of the
DMZ
With its cardboard towns and
PA systems:
“Come to communism, it is better—
Come to our side, now”
(roughly translated).

Demonstrations in the night clubs where
A five-foot man
Run & jump
Sidekicks
Directly over the head of a
Six-foot man with a balloon
In his teeth:
POP!

Near the end of his deployment,
An old man
Stopped him in the street.
Out of nowhere the man
Kissed his cheek, bowed and said
“Thank You.”

His grandfather had helped to
Clear a path for the old man’s
Freedom back in war some
50 years ago.

The old man was grateful and
So was the young man.
He found all he had been looking
For and
More.

It was time
to go home.

Mother

I peeled an egg for my mother today.
Slowly, minding that my
Nails not nick
The soft white.
I rinsed the egg
Under cool water
To wash away
A stray speck of shell.
While I peeled
Mother sat
In her blue chair, napping,
Her right foot waving a bit
As she slept.

She is sick again today.
So I have to nag her
With my eyes lowered.
To get up, to eat,
To put on brown pants and
Sit in the sunshine.
To take a dreaded bath.
She juts out her chin
Refusing to move.

So I prepare the egg
And place it,
Shining,
On the lunch plate.
I take her the plate
And say,
“Will you please eat an egg?”
When I want to say,
“Will you please live?”

Playing House

The small girl picks daisies,
white with yellow centers,
and puts them on a pretend
plate for eggs, sunny side up.
She adds birch bark as bacon
and serves it to her brother.

The night before drifts in shadow—
her father climbing walls
to escape from spiders,
empty whiskey bottles,
her mother's missing tooth,
brother sleeping outside
the door to keep father
from touching.

Her father was a butcher
when sober. He couldn't
control the guilt from
broken memories.
He wept into the ground
sausage, punched a steer
hung in the walk-in freezer.
Tears ran down his jaws—
blood on his fingers, blood
on his face from holding it
in his bloody hands.

Some people won't speak
about the darkness they
carry into adulthood.
I know a woman who will not
live in darkness. She tells
her daughter about playing house—
these are daisies she says,
they were eggs and bark, my bacon.
Her daughter Laughs,
how precious they seem
on the tiny plate.

Apologia for a Shopping List

Low-fat milk and a dozen
free-range eggs. I squeezed
the bread, six-grain,
announced it still as giving
as a woman's thigh
and soft enough to eat.
Our bed restored and tucked.

On the table, a vase of yellow
mums, and these lines,
wantonly assembled,
to wish you home today,
to wish you home today,
wish you home today
my love, to this empty house.

Too Much Reason

I have too much reason in my life.
I want to be in the teeth of a perception
that makes bunched leaves look like strangers
I've known all my life.

I want to be three years old and confused
about why mommy is mad about the lipstick
kisses on daddy's underwear.

I want to be the view through my window yesterday
that was a white bird gliding
above my still pond without me
wanting to know where the bird came from
or the bird flew to.

The Literacy of Sleep

In the Cuneiform of dry creek beds,
in the Morris Code of woodpeckers,

in lichen paintings on tombstones,
in a child's toe prints in cement,

not in the shattered windshields
of bombed cars, nor the shrieks of children,

but in the wondrous diction of sparrows,
in the morning prayers of pigeons,

in scribbles worms leave under rocks,
We are still here they say, older than bone,

older than the opposable thumb—
you still read us in your sleep.

Garden Work

Slashing my mattock into damp dirt
I am surprised to hear my father
breathing, though he is fourteen years
dead, and I am the one who gasps
for air. In a moment I am
again the girl with the mason jar
of iced tea, and he
is the one who leans on
an ax, waiting to drink.
I hand him that jar, memorizing
unconsciously the labored
breaths, and now I want
to tell him how I carry
that ax swing in me, how
his breath blooms like wildflowers
in the soil of my lungs.

Painted Ladies

I

Granddaughter calls from San Francisco,
says she saw the bridge and the Painted
Ladies. Images flit through my mind—
orange butterflies with black splotches;
kings and queens on a carnival float;
a transvestite straightening his black
stockings in a ladies' lounge in Knoxville.
When her postcard arrives, I envy her,
standing on the grassy lawn before
the Victorian houses in Alamo Square.

II.

A drawing hangs in my bedroom,
the Buchanan house in Lebanon,
Tennessee. Queen Anne style with
spires, gables, gingerbread, the house
seemed a mansion to childhood eyes.
My country porch was a balcony on
such a house, my teaset fine china,
my hand-me-down dress a princess
gown, my dolls painted ladies.

III.

In 1880, Thomas Hughes founded Rugby, a British colony on the Cumberland Plateau. Each year, the village celebrates with a pilgrimage through Victorian houses, including Kingstone Lisle, the house Hughes built but occupied only in random visits; the library, unchanged since 1882, books unread, a sign saying DO NOT TOUCH, as though Time holds its breath; Christ Church Episcopal where Hughes' mother Margaret worshipped and to which she donated an altar cloth. The festival culminates with food, ballads, and a maypole dance with rainbow ribbons, painted ladies, and the plaintive wail of *Greensleeves*. rocking along in the lap of Time.

Home at last, we kicked off the Sunday shoes that pinched our feet, rushed through chores, ate a supper of cold cornbread and buttermilk, sat on the porch to watch the sun sun set over the fields in the creek bottoms.

That corn sure is pretty, I thought.

Neon Breakfast South of Knoxville

Behind an old neon sign
The waitress wears a silky wrap around her pony tail,
Takes my order for eggs and toast;
A jukebox is playing a record by Fats Domino,
Something about walking to New Orleans;
That is the first tune; there are more:
My Girl and *Bye, Bye Miss American Pie*.
The waitress is overly made-up, too much rouge.
Men here are wearing big shoes with muddy heels.
Real men and women come here
For ham biscuits, grits, maybe hash-browns.

My friend, this is a patch we might wish to put
Into a quilt to keep us warm in winter,
A spot of history caught, preserved on the other side
Of the Interstate where across the dirt road
An old mill still operates;
Somehow, I have broken through a time barrier
To behold for a fleeting moment our past
Blurred on the edge of the present:
It is a twilight hem, some mysterious seam
Of time I have wandered into,
Like falling into the cuff of an old pair of knickers
Left for years in the back of a musty storage room.

Something tuned back the hands of a clock
That I might live briefly some moment lived before
In the scent of huckleberries, smoke twirling
Out of stone chimneys, a wagon wheel cutting trenches
In a wide field needing planting, the first kiss
On a shy girl's lips.
The waitress calls everybody "Sweetie,"
Smells of sweet water and sugar-cured ham,
Pours me more coffee in a lipstick-stained cup,
Goes behind the counter, yells an order again.

You would relish this moment, and like me,
You would absorb into your soul the red and gold
In these trees, the season's unexpected chill
Breathing its white breath over black walnuts
Fallen near a hay shed out back.
That song, *American Pie*,
Is playing its last verses, something about
Three admired men catching the last train for the coast.

My friend, I died in this restaurant,
Walk stiffly to my car, drive out into the highway,
A ghost in traffic.

Landscape, with Hussy

During spring rains that thick red clay
sucked at the soles of my shoes.

This well-tilled soil
had grown my father's corn,
cotton, soy beans, sugar cane.
The curved row of scented cedars,
the tumble of red creek water,
the slice of the blue paved road
triangled my parents' house
like a safe island.

Yet once, through that warm red mud,
a woman came in, from the summer dark,
and sat in our maple den.

Her breath smelled of stale beer,
a scent so forbidden

I thought instantly of hell.
She sat in the old brown chair
and drank water from a glass,
and after the sheriff took her away,
my father went out into the rain.

For years after that night,
I led my friends
to the old junk pile.

Our timid fingers traced
the lay of this land:
There's the chair where she sat.
That's the glass that she used.

The Gift

Three crows – sisters – come each morning
to my window. They perch on the cedar
branches, they dance on the scattered
grass and bare clay, they hop among the
fallen twigs and the ancient,
forgotten pebbles.

Soon they become impatient. They caw
and fly to the glass, flapping their dark wings,
while I slowly prepare: I clear the room,
removing the chair, the bed, my little table,
my books. I sweep carefully, gathering
all dust from the day before. I sit in the corner,
survey the empty room, select a place.

In time, resisting their impatience, I rise,
open the window, and lie on the hard, dark wood.
They perch on the sill until all is quiet.
Then one by one they descend to bare the
polluted heart, to eat its pain and
leave it clean. Each pierce of their sharp,
black beaks is their gift.

I am left in the sun.

All is quiet.

All is still.

The Only Difference Between 'Em

Summertime. July. About 4 p.m.
Grandpa opens the door and sets the lock
On the scalding metal screen
As the first load of tackle is hauled
To the boat
For a morning fishing trip.

Thermometer on the carport reads 96 and
It is hard not to notice
The two naked children in the front yard
Running wild through the heat.

The neighbor kids, about 4,
A boy and girl, have found relief
From the Tennessee sun
In the columns of spray projecting from
Grandpa's lawn sprinkler.

Only 12 myself, I am a bit
Embarrassed by the 2 nude youngsters
Pirouetting through the jets and
Spraying one another from head-to-toe
With the hose pipe.

Grandpa, on the other hand, being the wise old
Fellow that he is—seeing the beauty in it—
Grins and says something I will never forget:

“The only difference between 'em is what's
Between their legs.”

Looking back I realize that
Grandpa was right—
It was beautiful:
Like 2 children in the garden of Eden
Experiencing their first rain.

And I realize that, anatomically, Grandpa's saying
Is essentially true.

And I realize that,
As far as nearly all else goes between
Man and woman, Grandpa
Could not have been more mistaken
About anything else in the world.

Devacuees

“Evacuate!” cried the earnest souls (bless them) in
cadmium yellow vests, and
although I had no thought about it then,
it just seems so freaking ironic to me now . . .

evacuate—as in, desert, vamoose, head out,
leave completely empty,
when what we really did was stuff right to the nines
(i.e. *devacuate*) lower C-building.

With sweating bodies, sweating minds
that dared not speak a drop, we huddled—
making lame remarks, anything to stop ourselves
from breathing one another’s fears.
So huddled and constricted we seemed right then to be
that
one more sweaty body stuffed so full of sweaty soul
would surely burst those basement walls
like a dam, like an embolism
and we would all be scattered to
the fury of that nature, which
some say hates a vacuum (what about evacuees?)

All the same how grateful we grew when
more and more began to jam the hallway,
especially when we recognized this one or that—why,
I’m sure the thought must have crossed some minds
that these new arrivals neither had been ‘e’,
nor ‘de’, but simply
vacuees, as in vacated,
absent,
gone for good, but never for
forgotten.

And I don’t know and I wouldn’t risk a guess as to
whatever nature loves or what she doesn’t, but
I know I won’t forget that in those moments,
I surely loved each and every single
devacuee.

Preparing the Fruits of the Garden

Today, this summer kitchen is dedicated
to the coming shrink and pinch of winter, when
we will ache from touching this worn enamel table
where now the washed jars are waiting
in an angle of all-out sunlight.

Today, the table is warm, like what's alive
in the room. The woman cooking, the dog
limbed out on the cool floor, panting down
after a squirrel chase, the children
coming and gone again, carrying and putting down,
clinkering walls and doors, peeling the house raw
with their moist, soiled hands.

She is glad to have the task again,
one more summer of canning. She feels
the ambition of women long past
in their rainbow skins of terrain and time,
those work-shaped ants scolding their grasshopper-
menfolk who lay on their backs, scheming —
those short-lived household tenders
whose babies raced them to death.

She worries the stove is past cleaning,
counts the jars, smells heat itself
in her canner's bath. In the sink, grimy
garlands — stiff curls of tomato skin
and furry rags slipped from the sides
of glistening peaches — clutter the drain where
cranial pits and seeds lose their way. Long before
the ground is fixed with snow, tongs
and lids and pots will be scoured
and stored, but not today.

Skinny fingers of sweat tickle her ribs,
this woman preparing elixirs, provisions
for the expedition. As if the night bearing down on us
will be averted by compote, by cucumbers
married to spice. As if steam and sugar's acid
will render these vivid fruits to essences,

soothe, sate our darkest hunger
and preserve us.

it was all one whiteness, and a little fire

and it must have warmed us, but I remember cold,
1960, you might have been eighteen then,
you put me on the little sleigh wrapped up in blankets;
I steadied barrels, you emptied buckets, sang
while the sap boiled all night, a whole year's split wood;
you let me taste sugar on snow before I fell asleep;

twelve years later, you worked for the railroad, I'd sleep
on the drive back to Dartmouth in your ancient cold
car—we were neighbors, neighbors'd
help one another, it was what neighbors did back then;
I was supposed to keep you company, you sang
to me, the radio was broken, wrapped up in blankets,

I'd float in and out of dreams, your old army blankets
scratchy and musty, I was supposed to be company, but I'd sleep,
and you drove four more hours, north to Burlington, singing
to stay awake. I went south to Boston, to hard cold
Harvard Med School, we must have stayed in touch then
we went to the Harvard-Yale game, I would

have been twenty-two then, you would
have been past thirty, we wrapped up in blankets,
drinking hot rum and bourbon, got to half-time, and then
all around us men were singing, I must have fallen asleep,
they all sang the same song, I saw them scarred and cold-
eyed, quiet, and I'd forgotten your war, you sang

so sweetly, I saw the boy you were before you went, singing
in the glee club: it'd been a long time, I wouldn't
ask about it, but I took you back to my little cold
dorm room, you built a fire, thin blankets
wrapped around us, that was the only time we slept
together—we must have written letters, then

fallen out of touch, I got married, had three children, then
my marriage ended, I gave up singing,
came back to our little village, hating sleeping
alone. I saw you with your wife and children, I wouldn't
speak then, made myself act cold,
but really I was happy, to see the village blanketed

with snow, to see you happy, singing with your family, back then
you'd said you'd never have one, you were too broken, cold,
shivering despite my blankets, that night you at last slept well.

To Mr. Chen, the Chinese Restaurant Delivery Man Trapped in an Elevator for Three Days

Well, Mr. Chen, that's New York for you.
Apartment towers, they call them,
and you were on your way down on Friday night
to your bicycle locked outside, ready
to scoot you back for the next order
when your elevator stalled and went quiet
not up in the Bronx aerie with the flocks,
but between humble floors four and three.

You spent eighty-one hours without food or water,
but could still smell the cartons
of Kung Pao Chicken and shrimp fried rice,
still feel the warm weight of spare ribs
in your hands. The elevator you had traveled
a hundred times sounded no distress,
just hummed and stopped, and then all was quiet,
except for the hiss of the other elevators,
the passing of all nations voicing New York's
urgent imperatives and invectives,
and none heard your hollers.

The surveillance camera in the elevator
shone on you like a loving mother's eye,
but as so often happens, you were in its
blind spot, and love was not enough.
Your repeated cries into the intercom
fell all weekend on the inexplicably deaf ears
of Copstat Security's office staff and of the busy police
searching for you, up and down thirty eight floors,
searching stairwells, apartments.
They broke a door down and seized a stained shirt,
made an arrest like on television,
but the stains were barbecue sauce, not blood.

Tuesday morning, someone at Copstat flipped a switch,
and now, Mr. Chen, while you rehydrate
and process your new knowledge
of the plight of the caged animal, the City
ponders the widely published fact that you're
an illegal alien.

Here's hoping for one more blind spot,
Mr. Chen, one more deaf ear.

Yellow Birds

Goldfinch chatter at the feeders
stirs up my loneliness for you, not
as you lay in the hospital, gasping,
promising to drive up the mountain
to visit when you feel better, to see
the yellow birds. Since you never
came, I must journey to you. I drive
down I-40, take the scenic route past
the Caney Fork, past Carthage, past
Sampson's Mineral Wells, past our
high school, now the justice center
for Wilson County, to Grandfather's
farm. I find you floating in Spring
Creek like a mud turtle, rich loam
under your talons, moss growing
on your back. You shrill like a fly-
up-the-creek, calling your boundless
joy to the God who shines down on
your freckled face. We swim stroke
for stroke, until Old Hickory's back-
waters engulf the blue hole, the
bog where killdeer nest, the cornfields
where men drift in the muleteams'
wake. Poisoned waters heave
us up, you to your grave near our
grandparents, me to the goldfinches.
I fill the feeders and stand back as
yellow birds flock about, chattering.

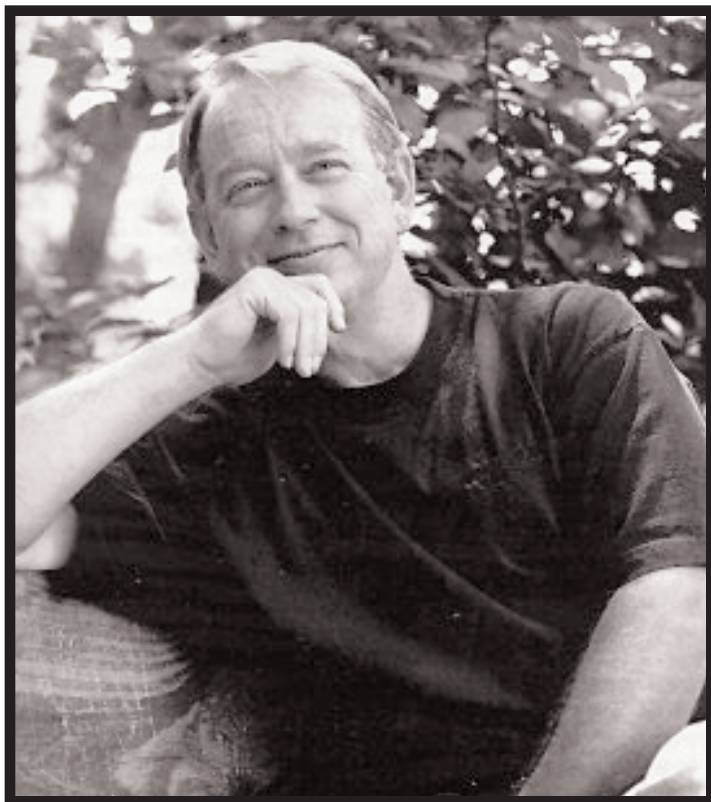
Apologia for T., Five Years Gone

The lip of that puckered roof drip,
drip, drooling into an off-key bucket.
My friend bent low in a sepia field
has left the house for bad or worse,
snatches after a single dead-weight leaf.
Fingers slim and bent as rust-nails.

He succeeds, or fails, I wouldn't know,
he has turned a weathered back to me,
splashed crownless hat back into place.
The umbrella appears as premonition,
and from the secret of its blooming
falls a bottle, a bone, a trumpet.
Cracked pocket watch and a list of names.

My friend turns once to remember,
theatrical across the shoulder of his coat
as if this rain will surely never end,
then leans ahead in possibility of a bow,
a curse, soundless exit or assignation.
He slouches for fallen gypsy grass,
parted grains failed compass for the sky.

Featured Author



Dan Powers

Landmarks in the Breath

Five deer today stepped from the blurry heat
of August's wide and sleepy yellow fields
to stand in the parking lot at Big Rock Market,
where tourists may rent canoes for a few hour's ride
down the quiet Caney Fork.

The five deer looked round them
at the pavement, at their knees,
at their delicate feet, at each other,
at the trees across the road.

Once, where I was casting a fly line,
a doe came slow in the crunch of the river pebble
to the edge of the water
and she leaped like a dog might leap
into the current. She swam out
with her long thin legs,
her feet barely grazing the sandy shoal
and she circled me where I waded
then swam away
and walked easy into the trees
where she shook herself dry like a dog.
If I told you she circled me three times
before she went back to shore,
you wouldn't believe me, probably.

Last night the evening sun had set the river fog orange and smoldering,
had blown its last hour's kindle into the white bark of sycamores
behind our garden.

My wife, pulling into our drive,
had to wait as a doe made its way across into the trees.
Cheryl said later, the deer was ghostly in her movement,
vaporous, almost a figment of the imagination.

Today, after a little while, the deer at the market walked on,
together, white tails flagging, into the green
and black conversation of the Oak trees.

Someone has said we cannot observe anything
without it changing.

The patrons in the store came out,
the cars that had stopped moved on.

People breathed again.

Everything trembled a little,

Some one allowed his voice

to rise above a whisper;

then everything was almost the same.

All Night Long

Across the river, coyotes have been yipping and yowling;
sometimes their voices sound like laughter.

At 2 AM, I hear them in my neighbor's pasture.
The hairs on my arm rise, my heart leaps,
my dog goes to the door and whines.
I want to go out, dash across the back yard
leap the strands of barbed wire,
lope then, loose and easy across the star fired meadow.

I might be welcome in that snarling toothy company
beneath the bright full moon.
scattering the rabbits, the calves,
the small field mice in the tangles of brown grass.

I want to clamber to the edge of that one outcropping
half way up the cliff, stark white in the moonlight,
lift a drooling muzzle to the whole vast sky
and howl and howl while my history lies torn behind me,
as my sane and somber present rests safe, snug
behind locked doors, beneath the covers,
where my love will turn toward me
and shiver as I climb in bed
my fangs clean and pure,
my wild heart less weary, at peace again.

An Interview: Dan Powers' Language for "Something Large Like God"

When reading Dan Powers' poetry, I am first struck by its directness and complete lack of any deliberate obscurity. One does not wade through a barrier of phraseology to get to the images. The images, however, resonate subtly and powerfully after the reading. Dan's first collection of poems *Mighty Good Land* is full of such resonance.

For example "Faith" is, on the one hand, a straightforward narrative of hard times in the rural South, but on the other hand, it is a powerful evocation of the loss of faith of the people hit by these hard times:

Outside town this morning
farmers gathered in a field to pray for rain.
Our flowers sold their colors to the wind
a month ago, when locals laid off from their jobs
headed north to New York or Michigan.

Dan's description of flowers "selling" their colors speaks volumes about the bleakness and helplessness of poverty, and renders the poem's title bitterly ironic.

"Rain," on the other hand, in describing the end of a four-year drought, "too late for last season's crop," captures the capriciousness of nature or divinity (take your pick), while suggesting that some of the truest poetry may be found in merely trying to survive: "We fill our mouths with words / as we try to find a language / for understanding God." Indeed, this may be in large part what Dan Powers' poetry is about—trying to understand a god, whose very omnipresence is confounding in its paradox of faith and despair. *Mighty Good Land* explores that paradox in the context of the life of a rural Tennessee family (largely Dan's) over the span of two generations.

To get an idea of what has gone into Dan Powers' life and poetic work (the two being fairly inextricable), I had a conversation with him at a Gallatin coffeehouse. I arrived, armed with the usual "writer-ly" questions, but of course, not knowing where they would lead. Dan was genuinely glad to be featured in *Number One*, as he holds the magazine in high regard—a fact

which quickly became evident as we talked about his beginnings as a writer. To begin, I asked him when and how he started writing:

Well, the first poem I wrote was when I was in the sixth grade. My teacher made me (grins). It was on sportsmanship, and it won first place. I didn't write again until I went to college at Tennessee Tech. I had a couple of things published in *Homespun*, their literary magazine, but then Vietnam got my anti-war sentiments fired up, and I wrote some poems about that, but I don't guess they wanted any political stuff—of course they probably weren't that good (grins). Then getting married ended my writing until I was thirty-seven.

When I asked Dan what got him really started again, he was really quick to credit Vol State in general, and *Number One* in particular:

Somebody came in the office at the steel mill where I was working and he had a copy of *Number One*. I read it, and next day I drove to Vol State looking for back copies. I met a lady in the English department—Jenny MacDougal. She brought out *a lot* of copies from the closet, and then she asked me if I wrote, and invited me to the writer's group. I didn't get the nerve to go, though, until I started working for TVA. I think that was around the mid-eighties, eighty-three or eighty-four. I used my accumulated days off just so I could go to the writer's group, but then it was just to listen. It took me about four or five sessions before I had the nerve to share aloud anything of mine.

As Dan told of the first time he read, I got a sense of just how important that writers' group was in honing his poetic abilities:

After I read, Betty Nelson asked me if I had any more poems, and I said, sure, I have more. I had shoeboxes full of them! So I gave her a shoebox full of poems. Six or eight weeks later, she said "Dan, I've finished reading your poems." And I got'em back, and there were red marks all over the place—with comments like "sentimental," "hackneyed, cloying, precious" but also circles and stars around things she liked. Betty gave me really good, honest, helpful criticism, that did more for me than any fancy workshop ever could! Her work on those poems encouraged me to continue writing. And before long *Number One* took a couple of my poems—I think this was in eighty-four.

Getting published in *Number One* encouraged Dan to look for other venues, as did meeting the prolific Tennessee poet Bill Brown, and subsequently participating in open mic poetry events in the middle Tennessee area:

Bill Brown was really encouraging. He talked me into going to a workshop in West Nashville, and that's where I met a lady named Eva Touster, a Professor at Vanderbilt who edited *Cumberland Review*. They published two poems of mine, so they were the first aside from *Number One*. After that I started subscribing to *Poet's Market* and getting names of publishers. Then I started going to a lot of open mike nights in Nashville—at Windows on the Cumberland mostly. I can't tell you how much of an encouragement Bill was though. He and I went on a backpacking trip to Roan Mountain in East Tennessee. We went there just to get away and write. That was really something for me—just to get away by myself for no other reason but to write. We hiked off to different places—Bill to his side, and me to mine, and that's where I wrote the initial draft of “The Sun Reminds Me of Being in a Chevy.” And then I really got into submitting poems all the time. It was also something of a game for me; I sent work to every magazine beginning with a “P.”

At this point one sees a picture of Powers becoming a poet in earnest—refining his writing, appearing at Tennessee venues to read, and relentlessly submitting his material for publication. Dan was quick to note that he received *plenty* of rejections, a fact that in retrospect should serve as an encouragement to any budding writers. Eventually, he was selected by New York poet Bob Holman to appear in the acclaimed PBS series, “The United States of Poetry,” where he appeared reading his poem “Morels.” He is admittedly proud to note that he was featured alongside many strong voices in contemporary literature including notable poets Joseph Brodsky, Derek Walcott, Allen Ginsberg, and one of his personal favorites, Leonard Cohen. Ultimately, however, Dan's quiet tenacity brought his work to fruition in 2005, in the aforementioned collection *Mighty Good Land*. I asked him how in particular this publication come about, and again his answer emphasized the importance of steadily maintaining a regimen of reading at various open mic venues:

For about eight or nine years I attended, as often as possible, a monthly Poet's Night at a place called Windows on The Cumberland. The owner, Charlie Fenton, welcomed poets and writers and musicians. When he sold the pub to others, the poetry nights were discontinued. But several of us had formed a bond that we didn't want to have broken, so we sought other venues to share our work. There were monthly readings at places like the Owl's Nest, and Bean Central, and at an old house near Sylvan Park where a small magazine, *Penny Dreadful*, was being published by poet Curtis (CRa) McGuirt. It was at one of those places I first met poet Brian Daly, who would later publish *Mighty Good Land*. After he decided to publish my work, we talked several times, and I handed him a large cardboard box filled with poems that had been written over a twenty year period—not in chronological or any kind of order—I'm just not that organized.

Dan's admission to a lack of organization surprised me in light of the way *Land* is organized into chapters ("Good Earth and Poor," "In What Light," "Aching Hands," "God, if You Are There," and "Enough"), because I had thought that there was quite a bit of thematic relationship between the poems in each section. When I asked Dan if he had done that, he chuckled, "Naw, that was Brian's idea. He's a smart guy!"

Dan's reluctance to talk about himself and eagerness to give credit to those who have provided encouragement to him along the way became particularly evident as immediately he remembered one of those people:

You know something? I have to tell you about someone who encouraged me early on, and I wish now I had dedicated the book to her. Her name is Shirley Phipps. She was my English teacher in the eleventh and twelfth grades, and she really encouraged me to write back in those days. She was kind-spirited—nice looking, too! And she's still living. A couple of years ago she came to see me at the writer's panel at Vol. State. She came up afterwards and said, "I just knew that was Danny Powers!" and that she was really proud of me.

Turning to Dan's poetry, I first had to ask how much of it was autobiographical—as there is always a hazard to confusing the speaker with the poet. Dan readily affirmed that many of his poems, particularly those about his family, were rooted in his own memories. Noting that in the context of the hard times described, his father emerges as almost mythical; a millwright “standing among sweating iron men... tall among them, / somehow a music in his body” (“Powerhouse”), a farmer, whose “motion, / wheeled in the order of those green rows, / was more of grace and dance than toil.” I asked Dan about his father. “Well, he was child of the Great Depression, and for him ‘town’ was Madison, and Nashville was ‘the city.’ There was a lot of music in my dad, though.” My sense of Dan's admiration for his father, evoked strongly in those poems, was underscored when Dan said, “I wish I were more like him.”

Dan was quick to note that his father's life wasn't all about hard times, as he drew my attention to “Blue Light.” Inspired by a photo of his father playing drums in a jazz band in his younger days, this poem shows the musical side of this man in another dimension: “And God, he is smiling—almost laughing, / And there in his hands are those sticks / he kept time with on the snare / and there is the bass drum that beat like a heart / and bore his nickname, Dink, / scrawled across the front.” There is, however, another side to this reminiscence, as the photo has been in a “shoe box / kept beneath my mother's bed.” Plus, there is “what the photo doesn't show... my mother / young, sober, grim-faced, maybe scowling / from a table in the back / behind those girls up there dancing close / against the men in that blue light.” Here can be seen how a simple photograph can trigger the poet's imagination, and so I asked Dan what triggered those particular lines. “I just remember how my Mom was, about my Dad.” he explained. “They argued rarely, but when they did, some of that came from her being afraid that he wasn't going to go to Heaven and pass go!” Dan chuckled. I mentioned that I thought his sympathies lay in what the picture did show, as emphasized by the last lines, “he looked happy ... as if his life was something special, / as if his life was something good.” Dan agreed: “That's why those lines are dominant.”

Just as Dan extrapolates a sense of a part of his father's life from the photograph, so is he able to give a sense of both his mother and father from objects that had been in their possession. “In the Attic,” for example, evokes another side of Dan's father:

the old red aluminum pitcher
that used to sweat icy cold
on still August nights and make a river
that would crawl across the dark and touch
the vast plain of dreaded silence
in my father's fingers.

“There’s a lot about my dad that I remember from going through stuff he had. I can feel his heart almost. It’s a lot like, if you’ve ever been fly fishing, and you’ve got a really good bamboo rod, you can almost feel the heart of the one who made it. There’s another poem—I believe it’s in *Number One*—“My Father’s Knife,” that had that kind of feel to it.”

“In the Attic” also gives us a sense of Dan’s mother referring to a picture she threw away, “because it magnified her belief / that I was terminally asthmatic.”

We get a closer view of Dan’s mother elsewhere, particularly in “Escape” and “Home Baking.” “I always thought of her as Cinderella,” said Dan. And one can see that, in the former poem, with the lines, “My mother was escaping her childhood / as a real life Cinderella / with a wicked stepmother / who would beat her with a spatula,” and more eerily in the latter poem:

And I knew in the warm house
sister would be snug at father’s knee,
his big hard hand stroking her brown hair,
stepmother behind him in the ritual kneading
of his thick neck, a smile across his face,
the smell of baking heavy in the air.

“I wanted that one to be from my mother’s point of view, so I tried to use her voice for that one,” commented Dan. He went on to describe her as a religious person, and one can get the particular sense of that through the poem “White Boat,” about his father’s first stroke in which she is portrayed with a “Bible open on her lap / like a helmsman’s chart, waypoints lost, / she is redefining course / by stars and the word of light.” Dan remembered her as having had her faith really shaken by that stroke, and reading the Bible as a way to hang on.

A slightly less grave aspect to Dan's mother's religiosity is found in "Whitewashing the Blues." "The first lines pretty much say it," chuckled Dan. "I wanted to be like Elvis, and she wanted me to be Pat Boone." In the poem's reminiscence, a sympathy for her comes through, in the lines:

She pushed my hair up from my eyes
while she lectured me about clean living,
about the image I presented to a world
already rocking with guys like Elvis and Little Richard,
a world already teetering towards anarchy.

While Dan can have a certain amount of sympathy for such a viewpoint, it is clearly not his own. "Evidence," is a particularly good example. In its simple description of himself and his wife and a candlelight church service on Christmas Eve, he takes a gentle poke at a certain type of orthodoxy, represented by a Christmas card, "inscribed by a well-meaning friend: / 'If you were arrested for being a Christian, / would there be enough evidence to convict you?' " but answers this with a strong affirmation of a more substantial faith:

We drive home holy, holding hands,
singing Christmas with each other,
born again, this between us,
the only evidence we need.

When I mentioned this poem as a favorite, and asked what went in to it, he replied, "You've probably seen these bumper stickers and tracts people hand out. Well that's pretty much my answer." The sense of discernment between formalized religion and a more profound spirituality that one finds in this poem is very characteristic of Dan himself: "I used to be really involved in church; I was a deacon — and that's when some of these poems started appearing. Now the garden and the river is my church! You know God never told Adam to go to church; Adam simply met his God in the garden. I don't know if I turned out like my mother would have wanted. I wouldn't want her to see this book!"

Reading the aforementioned poem and others, it appears that for Dan, spirituality is simply too large for any belief system, and can best be

apprehended through experience and chronicling of that experience in an imaginative way, “House on Berry Street,” for example, at first glance a straightforward reminiscence of the house where he was born, and a description of his childhood bedroom, contains a striking image of the child in darkness watching the slot of light at the bottom of the door, going “dark and cold / swelling into something large like God.” Understanding through experience is portrayed in “The Sun Reminds Me of Being in a Chevy,” with its depiction of “the smoky church of polished chrome, / glowing dials, tinted glass, rock and roll, / and rolled and pleated leather.”

It may well be that writing itself is another kind of “church” for Dan; certainly it seems to be a kind of fulfillment, as became evident when I asked him simply: what is writing to you?

“When I started writing poetry,” he recollected, “I wasn’t happy, despite a good family, and great kids, living in solid middle class security. There was still a hole, which I was trying to fill—or if I couldn’t do that, at least maybe I could define it, or describe it.” He noted that his personal life is much happier now, but added, grinning, “of course the poems came much more readily in the unhappier days.”

Given the recurring questions about life its own self, which at one time or another touch everyone, and Dan Powers’ keen sensitivity to them and honesty in confronting them, I believe it’s safe to say that many more poems, with a keen perception of “something large like God,” will be coming—readily or not.

Her Baby Will Sing

When she woke up this morning something was different. It took her awhile before she understood just what it was. The weight that she had carried on her shoulders for so long was gone. Just like that, gone.

She was halfway through her breakfast chores when she realized that she could actually stand up straight, that she could take a deep breath and let it out slowly without that familiar catch in her chest.

Why today?

He had not come home last night. It was nothing new; he could be gone for days at a time. Last night was the first night that she had slept through without wondering if he would be coming in with liquor on his breath and an attitude to match the wretched smell.

Funny, she hadn't even thought about him once last night.

She finished up the chores inside and went out to take care of the animals. The sun was just coming up over the mountains. She loved her cabin; it was her father's before he died and left it to her. It used to be hers; then it was her husband's. Everything was his, even her.

As she poured what little slop she had for the hogs into the trough she had a faint memory of the dream from the night before. Or was it from the night before that? It made her shudder; it was a horrible dream that she didn't want to remember. Something terrible had happened. She wondered why sometimes dreams could seem so real. No sense in thinking about it, she thought, and she pushed it out of her mind.

After the hogs had been fed, she milked their little cow. Poor little thing, she thought, I know how you feel. She was bony and tired looking. She turned her out to pasture. Then she let the mule out of the little lean-to into the field on the left of the property to try to find something to munch on in the melted patches of snow. She loved this side of the old place. It was where she would grow her sunflowers this spring. She had been growing them for years, just like her mother had when she was a little girl. They kept the birds out of the garden and helped to bring in a little money for the few things that she bought from town. Everyone loved the salty sunflower seeds that her mother was known for. She had a secret; she added cayenne pepper to the salt mixture when she laid them out to dry. There were quite a few farmers who carried little brown bags filled with the seeds with them on their tractors. It made her feel proud when she saw them.

She loved that field of sunflowers. It was a beautiful place to go and think. When she was young, she would dream about getting married to a man just like her father and having ten children out there surrounded by the bright yellow petals. She would watch her mother work out there in her bonnet and try to imitate every move she made. She would imagine her babies playing out there, one day wanting to grow up like her. Would they hope to be just like her? She had thought so, back then anyway.

Now she loved her field of sunflowers for another reason—because they offered a place to hide, sometimes, when she needed it. If he was drunk enough he couldn't find her out there, but only if he was drunk enough. Most of the time he was just drunk.

Time to wash some laundry and start dinner. She wondered if he would be home tonight. If so he would expect a meal on the table. She went down to the root cellar for a couple of potatoes and some dried beans. She went out to the smoke house and cut a piece of salt pork for seasoning. When she picked up the large knife kept out there just for this purpose, her hand started shaking. As she slipped the sharp blade through the piece of salted meat her stomach turned. Funny, it never seemed to bother her before. Maybe the baby made her feel this way. Something told her this wasn't it, but she pushed that thought out of her mind just like she did the dream. She didn't have time to worry about silly things like that. She had work to do.

The baby. If her memory was correct she was about two months along, a baby. The thought filled her with nothing but joy. In the past it used to make her sad. She used to think that there was no way that she could ever be a mother; they could barely survive the winters here themselves. Life with him was just too damned hard and to bring a baby into it would have been selfish and wrong. But this time she could hear her mother's voice saying "Where there's a will there's a way." She also used to say that God always takes care of his children. Maybe He finally remembered her here in this little cabin.

She went into the kitchen and took out the big pot she used for stew and beans. She filled the pot with water from the well and added the beans. She started the fire under the pot. She peeled and cut the potatoes, added them to the beans with the pork. She liked the way it felt, having a pot of beans cooking in the kitchen. It was something solid, something you could depend on, that pot of beans. It was the little things like this that got her by. No matter how bad things could be, there were always beans and wood for the fire. You have to be grateful for what you have, she thought.

Her mother used to sing as she did her chores. She sang up until the day she died, and had always been happy, even when things were hard. She wanted so bad to be like her mother, but her husband was nothing like her father had been. It was too hard to sing most days.

Not today. Today she sang as she worked. She remembered every word in the old songs that she used to sing with her mother. It was a wonderful feeling. Her baby would sing.

She came across her husband's shoes behind the door. Weird, why were his shoes here? That old feeling came back, creeping up her neck, but she pushed it away and took the shoes out to the back porch. They may come in handy, of course he would want them when he came back, but if not the young boy that lived next to their farm may need them. They were nice shoes; her husband always wore nice shoes. He said that he deserved them, as much as he was on his feet and as hard as he worked. She just wore his old hand me downs. Maybe she would keep these for herself.

Soon it would be time to mix the batter for the corn cakes that he always expected to have with his meal. Maybe tonight she would make biscuits instead. That sounded better and something told her he wouldn't be home tonight anyway, so biscuits it would be. What a treat.

A couple of months passed without a word. She had biscuits as often as she liked. She sang every beautiful hymn she could remember. She even made up a few of her own. A couple of nights here lately, she had taken her father's fiddle down from the hearth. It had been a long time since anyone had touched it. Thank God her husband never thought of it, or surely it would have been traded off for moonshine or whatever else he wanted. Probably another pair of soft leather boots. She was surprised to find that she could actually remember a couple of tunes.

Sometimes at night that old nightmare would rear its ugly head. The one where the snow is stained with blood and the hogs are loose in the yard. She is carrying a pair of boots into the house. There is blood on her dress—a dress that she hasn't been able to find since last winter. The dream made no sense to her, so she didn't try to figure it out.

Her neighbor came over one evening with a box full of baby things. She had been blessed with five beautiful babies of her own. The fifth was her last; she couldn't have anymore, she said, so she thought that she should give the things to someone who could use them. It just felt right, the lady said, and that was that. She said that she would be back to check on her in a couple of weeks and that she would be there when it was time for the baby to be born. She was surprised at how easy it was for her to accept this

friendship. At first she wasn't sure if she could, but it was so sincere and heartfelt that she couldn't do anything but hug her neighbor there on the porch. No one had ever been so nice to her before.

She was not alone anymore. She had been so alone when her parents had died. Now she had a friend.

She worked the field herself to get it ready for her sunflowers. She was amazed at how easy it was—how the mule seemed to do all the work for her. Her husband had hated him. He had kicked and cussed that old mule every day he worked with him, calling him a worthless animal and threatening to shoot him at least once a week.

He seemed to love to pull the plow for her; she would scratch his ears and feed him apples from the orchard. That was a new treat for the hogs as well. She thought they looked fatter and healthier than ever. Her husband would have never allowed it, feeding the animals something as good as that, he said it was a waste, even though so much fruit had gone bad, just rotting there on the ground. They couldn't possibly eat it all or put it all up for the winter. Not just the two of them. She noticed and took pride in how well the animals were doing, there were actually a few little piglets now to take care of. She felt blessed. Her neighbors had let her cow into the pasture with their bull, so hopefully she would have some beef this winter. That was the idea anyway; she wasn't sure if she really wanted the beef, but it was nice to see her little cow that just a few months ago looked so scrawny and pitiful, look fat and happy.

She was content with the rabbits and the venison that her neighbor's brother would bring for her on occasion. Well, he would leave this with his sister for her. He wouldn't be as forward as bringing it to her cabin.

Her neighbor's brother, the thought of him made her cheeks burn. What a sweet and quiet man. Sometimes he would leave a bundle of wild roses on her porch tied with little scraps of ribbon. Once he had left her a little robin's egg; he said it was actually for the baby. It was small, he said, and it made him think of the little baby growing inside of her. It was an omen, too, he said, because it was blue. He said the baby would be a boy. She remembered how he had laughed at himself when he said this and how he had turned his hat around and around in his hands. She had made a little play nest with the scraps of ribbon from the roses and had placed it on her mantle.

How nice her little garden was coming up.

This spring she planted it her way. There were plenty of wildflowers growing all around. Maybe it was a waste of time, but the flowers brought

her such joy, that she didn't mind the extra time it took. She was sure that it kept the rabbits out of the vegetables too, so it wasn't all a waste. He would have called it nonsense, or worse, horseshit, but she hadn't seen hide nor hair from him since last November. Or was it December? She couldn't remember; she didn't think about it too much anymore.

Tonight she had been invited to her neighbors' for dinner. She loved her new friends and their large, loving family. They had taken her in and made her one of their own. The children actually called her aunt Laura. She was truly blessed. She rubbed her round stomach and told her baby she loved him. She felt the baby kick so she patted him back. Yes, she thought, you love me too. You will be the happiest baby ever born in these mountains. She would tell him these things constantly, without saying a word. She knew he heard her he always let her know.

She had baked a pie earlier to take with her, using the apples she had canned last fall. It seemed like a hundred years ago. Her kitchen smelled like cinnamon and sugar. She no longer smelled the sweat and meanness that used to cling to all the walls. No matter how hard she used to try she could not get that smell out of there. Funny, it was completely gone. She had not even noticed that it wasn't there until she smelled the fresh pie.

She stood up straight and took a deep breath without one single catch in her chest, and she smiled.

The Repeated Word

“I just don’t want to talk anymore. What is left to say?”

I know. Even as I say those words, they make no sense. Why am I saying I have nothing left to say? I wasn’t saying them to you, anyway. You don’t care if I repeat myself, do you. You repeat yourself all day long—the same words rolling out according to the card someone gave you years ago, the same words thrown back at you. But you never get tired. That’s the thing I don’t understand. I’m tired. I’m eighty-seven years tired.

Oh, I know I’m supposed to lie about my age, but look at me. The best I could do would be to claim seventy-five. What’s the use? I said I was tired of talking. Most talking is lying anyway—“That’s a nice dress, Mrs. Murphy; that’s a lovely child, Mary Jo; no, I’ll be fine here by myself, dear”—see what I mean? Maybe I’m just tired of lying. The trouble is, finding the truth to tell people is even harder. I wonder if we grow old because of all the words we say.

That’s your secret, isn’t it. Say the same thing, and say it well. Say it enough, and you make it so. Oh, but that can’t be, though. So many people say the same things over and over and lie every time. “I love you, Mama.” How often have I heard that?

Have I told you about my daughter? She’s a nurse in Richmond—well, she was. She came down to Elizabeth City to take care of me. That’s where I live. You see, she lives in Williamsburg, and she’d drive to Richmond—it’s an hour drive, but the pay was better. Her husband’s not happy about her coming to stay with me, but when was he ever happy? She tried to move me up to live with them—even took me up there for a few days, or so she said, but if I’d have wanted to live in Virginia, I’d have moved there three years ago. She brought me back home once she figured I was going to die soon.

I’m glad you aren’t going to argue with me about that. She knows it’s coming. I can see it on her face when she looks at me. I guess you don’t have to speak to lie. First she looks at me honestly, and then she forces a smile. She knows the truth. Why won’t she just say it? You know the truth, too. Why don’t you ever lie? Probably you don’t have to. You learned your one line those many years ago, and it’s all you have to do, saying it over and over.

It feels good just sitting here talking to you. My sandwich even tastes better with you—I guess it's the salt. Emma—that's my daughter—won't let me have any salt these days. You don't mind, though. I made this sandwich myself. Do you believe me? Emma wouldn't. She makes me wear diapers because she says I can't walk to the toilet anymore. She'd never believe I could make a sandwich. Well, I didn't make the potato salad. That's the reason it needs salt, you see. She made that. But you let me salt it all I want.

Yes, she makes all my food. She used to take me out to eat, but she gave that up because I embarrass her. I remember the last time she took me out to eat. She and this friend of hers she'd nagged into coming to visit her. She kept saying she hadn't invited Doris to help care for me—said it so many times, I think Doris finally believed it was just an accident that there had to be two people around to handle me. You see, doing things is lying as well. How many things do we do every day, just to make us all think there's some point in it? I'm just as tired of doing lies as telling them.

We went to get pancakes. She kept telling me to lean over my plate so nothing would fall out of my mouth and onto my dress. "Lean over your plate, Mama. How many times have I told you to lean over your plate?" How many times did I tell her to stay out of the dirt when she wore her dresses? How many times did I tell her not to get dirty with boys working their way under her dresses? Did she listen? Go back a couple of husbands, and you'll have the answer to that. What's a little syrup on my dress? It's not as though the waiter will give me a second look. I'm not even going to need this dress much longer, as her eyes keep telling me she knows.

Oh, you're wondering how I got here. Well, I still know how to use a phone, don't I? I called up that taxi company—the same one that always carries me to my doctor—and they sent a car right out. You should have seen the look on the driver's face when I said I wanted to go see the lighthouse. "That's over a hundred miles," he said. But I had the money saved, all of it in a shoebox. Emma never looked in that box. What did she care about her father's letters to me when he was off in the war? She didn't have time to look at the pictures of my parent's home in Europe. She has her own worries, of course, her children, that husband of hers, you see. She thinks she has to take care of me.

I wrote her a note before I left. I do feel bad about leaving the way I did. She was asleep on the couch in the front room. I called the taxi company, got my money, slipped out the back door, and walked out to the

street, all while she slept. I know when she wakes up, she'll be upset, but as I told the taxi driver, I just had to see the Hatteras lighthouse and stick my toes in the water one more time. I hated lying to him, but I told him that my sister lived down here and would pick me up. He didn't want to leave me here alone, you see.

And it wasn't exactly a lie. She did live down here, until she died. That was five years ago, so I've gotten here a bit late, but he didn't need to know that. Besides, I really came to see you. It was hard to find you—so many people are crawling around the beach these days, but I found you. I suppose I should say that you found me. You saved me this spot, didn't you. When my family left our home on your other side, I looked at you and knew that you were my friend. You've been speaking your one word to me ever since, and knew that I'd come back to you someday.

You feel nice around my body as you roll in and out, speaking your one word.

Hill Story

So, what are you doing up here? Huntin' you say? Did you have any luck? I figgered not. Oh, you went by the old cabin, huh? I kinda thought so, you look a little pale, like mebbe you done seen a ghost. Light and set fer a spell. I'll get us something to drink. Somethin' you look like you need.

Oh, me? That don't matter. I done bin here so long that I don't rightly remember who I am, most of the time. They's some who call me the piper on the mountain, or the fiddler on the ridge. See I play a fiddle a lot late at night, and I guess it carries. I used to play the pipes but they wore out and I just haven't redded them up. But the fiddle is one I done brawt over the mountains back when I used to hunt fer furs. Oh, back to that cabin. Well, let's see

Back yonder, old John Cantrell, his wife and his son and two daughters came over the hills in a studebaker wagon pulled by a team of brindle oxen. They had a string of saddle horses and plowmules with them and a wagginbed full of the tools it took to build a farm. They built a good one, too. It was a few years after that building was done and finished that things got bollixed up. Old John was a right big man, and he was proud of that bigness, too. He cleared land and plowed with his wife right beside him and the young'uns coming up to work alongside of him, too. He used to come down to the settlement and brag about his strength and show it off. Why, one time they tell how he lifted a five hundred pound barrel of curin' salt into his spring waggin by grabbin' a holt of the edges of both heads and lifting it into the bed. He didn't gut it in neither he lifted it clean. Then, thar was the time that old Esau Crippen dared him to a fight in front of the store. Well, that was a mistake. See old Crippen was a big man, too, who had been a rough and tumble fighter back in the rafting days. He had met Mike Fink, so he claimed, and others claimed it too, and he had beat him bad. He was an eyegouger and an ear chawer. He stood a head taller than John Cantrell and they was a bettin' on how bad John would be hurt. John turned around to them an laughed when he heard them abettin. He said to all of them: "Hell, boys, I'll take them bets and cover them with gold." Then he turned to the business he come fer.

He just beat old Crippen into a bloody pulp without breaking a sweat. Crippen had to be hauled home in his spring waggin by one of the spalpeens from the settlement. After that John Cantrell never got another

fight goin. He always boasted that “no man could ever fill his boots.” Nobody tried, either.

As time went on his girls grew big and beautiful, both over six foot tall with thick dark hair and pretty skin. They were reckoned as awful fetchin’ women. Rabin Cantrell, the boy, was as big as his pap and was just as tough a fighter, almost. They say that him and his pap had one fight. It lasted all of one day and into the night. The old man won, but just barely. Them two men made a terrible team. Nobody ever tried to best them together or apart. Then it was summer and the berries on the hills were ripe.

You haf to know how it was then. People on the land made out anyway they could. It wasn’t that money was skeerce, it was that it just wasn’t much of it around to be had. Old John had more than most because he sold the squeezins across the mountain in a settlement in the cove. There was always music and laughing in the Cantrell cabin and there was a fair amount of generosity, too. They wasn’t no church goers, and if they had been there warn’t no churches to go to, but nobody ever went away from their door empty. It was one hot day that life changed for the Cantrells all of a sudden.

Big John always made the boots and shoes for the family. He made good ones, too. He had learned as a bound boy way back on the coast, and it was a work that fit his hand. He made good strong work boots to protect his and his folk’s legs from the big rattlers and copperheads that grew better than any crop on them sidehill farms. He made the uppers real thick, and tough. On this particular day it was time for berry pickin, and the whole family was in the berry patch on the side of the mountain above their tight double-crib log cabin. It was about the time that they stopped to drink from a crock jug that a fulsome heavybodied rattler hit John right at the ankle. His fangs got though the leather and went into John’s hide. Old John let out a curse and kicked hard. They say that the big snake made a pretty figure eight as it flew way down the mountainside. John made it home before the poison put him down. Ruth, his wife, pulled off the bloody boots and set to making several cuts across the bites with his clasp knife. She sucked hard at the poison and got most of it out, or so she hoped. Then she got the jug out of the cupboard and let him drink from it as much as he wanted. He began to swell and to become feverish. Late that night by the light of a grease lamp, as she wiped the sweat off his swoll face the skin cooked by his fever came off on the rag in sheets. He died afore morning, out of his head, but saying over and over, “No man can fill my boots . . . no man.”

They began the family graveyard the next day. Rabin made a good coffin out of some fine whipsawed cherry that had been supposed to be a sideboard, and they laid John under a cedar tree that grew straight and wide in the corner of the yard toward the back of the house lot. Ruth and the girls sang a hymn, and Rabin, a little shy about praying still did lead the family in a prayer. One or two of the closest neighbors came to the buryin' but it was too far from most folks.

Like they knew John would of wanted, they didn't slow down for the angel of death, they just waved him on and went back to work. They worked, too. With old John gone it was Rabin that was man of the family and he tried to live up to it. He did right pert at it too. Them girls, Sophy and Sairy worked like men, but they made to look as womanly as they could. When the Methodist camp meeting down at the forks turned into a real church, they went every Sunday and sang, so the oldtimers said, like angels from Heaven. Rabin went, too as did Ruth Cantrell. The farm still prospered and Rabin was a good man, makin' good moonshine and better crops. It was a few years later that the one skill that John never taught his son caused a big problem. It was in the winter, and the snow was beginning. Rabin's boots was about wore out. Big John's old bloody boots still sat under the bed where he died. Ruth kept them there. They were dusty and a little dry as leather gets, but Rabin looked at them and told his ma, "I am goin' to use Pa's boots. He said that no man could fill them, but I think I have earned them. I don't think he'll mind." Then he laughed a hard laugh. "Besides he's been dead for three years, and I doubt that he is still watching." Ruth didn't say much but they say she looked a little worried. He shoved his feet into the boots, and went on out. I heard that he made it about half a day when he began to feel a pain in his right foot and it began to swell. He was in the log woods squaring up crossties with his pa's broadax, when he decided that if he was going to get home he had to go then. He made it to the porch and fell, swelled and feverish. He died that night.

The next day the family that was left and a small crowd of church folks sang Rabin through, and lay him beside his Pa. The Cantrell women didn't join in much, and the old folks claimed that they looked scared. See, Rabin had died of a rattlesnake bite in the chill dead of winter.

Time passed and life took on the pattern it would take from then on. The women worked like men. They still came to the church and the store, and they sang and laughed and lived as well as they could. It was unusual that not one of the settlement men ever courted Sophy or Sairy. They were, so it

was said, beautiful and smart and good cooks but they were like old John and like the brother. They didn't need anybody. Especially any men.

Time passed and in the fall of the year a long time later, it was Sophie that decided that she would try those boots. She had some fence work to do and it would be hard on her legs and feet since she was using that new fencing stuff they called "Bobwarr." She shoved her sockless feet into the boots and went on to work, Sairy was with her. Sophie was the oldest and she felt that she was as good as any man. "Pap would be shore put out to see me in his boots, wouldn't he Sairy?"

All Sairy said was that Rabin didn't fill them long. It was about two hours later that Sairy brought her big sister home on the groundslide. They buried her the next day, beside Rabin, her brother. This time there wasn't anybody there but one old man and his son. They had been huntin; and saw the buryin' and came by to offer their help. They were thanked by the two women and left without any funeral vittles. Sophie had died of rattle snake bite to the ankle, same as John and as Rabin.

This time things changed for the women. They didn't come to the store much and finally gave up going to the church. When they were asked about needing help, they politely but firmly refused. Hunters would see them plowing the old fields with Ruth leading the horse and Sairy guiding the plow. They would be dressed in waist overalls and floppy hats or poke bonnets. Their hair was flyaway, and they sometimes stumbled as they walked. They fought the farm like it was old Scratch hisself. They became almost feared they were so independent. Some of the women began to tell tales on them that made them sound like witch women. Men fought shy of them because they just plain scared them.

Finally, in the spring of a few years later, Sairy came out of the hills to buy some staples at the store. The hangers-on stared at her. Her long hair was gone. It was short, clipped all over her head. Her face was lined with them wrinkles that come from too much work, and her left hand, two fingers were gone from a miss-aimed hatchet, so they said, and the stumps had been sewed closed by what looked like darning thread. She said almost nothing, bought the little she could and left, riding on an old black mule that looked like he could use some grain.

Nobody is real sure what went on after this last trip. Nobody went up there to see until a long time later. Some say that Sairy decided to put on the boots, and made it to the hogpen. Falling into it over the rail fence. The story is that Ruth got her out, fighting off the hawks that were eating on her.

They say, then, that Ruth scratched a hole out in the grave yard and rolled her last child in, covering her with what dirt and rocks she could. Why she didn't try to get the new doctor that had come into the holler to come up there, nobody knows. What happened next is still partly guesswork and partly from what people could figure when it was all over.

After Ruth had buried Sairy, she went on back into the cabin, carrying the boots. By this time those boots had become dirty and cracked, but still serviceable if she could soften them. She shoved her arm down into the right boot and took up a handful of lard in the other hand. Something scratched her or bit her. She didn't think much about it until she began to feel the burning and swelling. Then it was too late.

A few weeks later, warm weeks, the new preacher decided that he needed to visit this strange family up in the head of the holler. He stepped up on the porch and knocked on the door. It swung open and he could smell death, rank and vile. He looked inside, briefly, then he mounted his horse and road hell for leather back to the store for some help and for a strong drink. Ruth was sitting in her old rocker, or what was left of her was, she was so far gone from the heat that the face that looked toward the door was only a near fleshless skull, grinning, so that preacher felt, at him.

That's about it. They buried her that day right beside her family. They did cover Sairy a little better, some dogs had dug her out, mostly. Then they went away. They left the farm to go back to the woods. It was like nobody wanted to have nothing thing to do with the place. That was funny, too, because most people took death as a part of life and when death was done, they put him to one side and plowed him under. Something about this one was too much for anybody from the holler.

Now, you are going to tell me that it was getting close to evening when you got to the rise where the cabin stands, and you heard music and laughter. You are going to say that you could see the warm lights of grease lamps and firelight, and you are going to tell me that when you reached the old ragged porch it all went dark and all you could hear was a chair rocking on the rough puncheon floor . . . Is that what you were going to say? Don't worry, it happens about once a year, maybe twice. It happened to me, back when I first came up to the head of the holler.

Oh, those boots . . . well when the men came up to bury Ruth, they saw that her arm was inside the boot. When they slipped it off and looked at it they were pretty surprised. Old Charley Brooks took his Barlow knife and flipped two rattlesnake fangs out of the leather. They were sticking all the way

through, and they had killed a whole family. I know you are going to tell me it is impossible, that there has to be pressure from a livin' snake to shove the poison into a person. That this couldn't have happened. Well, youngster, I know this is so. My grandpap told my pap the story, and my grandpap never lied.

Contributors

J.E. Bennett a West Virginia native, served three years in the U.S. Army. He Attended the University of Delaware and West Virginia, earning a B.A. in English and an M.A. in creative writing. He has taught writing and literature at West Virginia University and the University of Delaware and now works as a technical, free-lance writer. In 2001, he won *Descant's* Frank O'Connor Award. Look for his work in *Orbis*, *Mid-America Poetry Review*, *Perspectives*, and others.

Gaylord Brewer is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where he edits *Poems & Plays*. His most recent book of poetry, a collection of apologies, is *Let Me Explain* (Iris Press, 2006). His work also appears in *Best American Poetry 2006*.

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Bill Brown lectures part-time at Vanderbilt University and is the author of three poetry collections, two chapbooks and a writing textbook. His new collection, *Tatters*, is forthcoming from March Street Press. His recent work appears in *North American Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *English Journal*, *Atlanta Review*, *Borderlands*, *Rattle*, *South Carolina Review* and *Cairn*.

Elkin Brown has taught fifteen years at Volunteer State, where he is faculty co-advisor for *Squatter's Rites*, the student literary magazine. Before embarking on a teaching career, Brown was a professional (?) musician and also a free-lance writer for several music publications. In his spare time, Brown enjoys playing music, writing poetry, painting, bicycling, cat-herding, and conducting twelve-step programs for those hooked on phonics. He lives in semi-rural Wilson County with highly significant other Billye, son Casey (when financially challenged), the aforementioned cats, and one uber-possum.

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Mickey Hall teaches composition, literature and film at Volunteer State Community College. He enjoys gardening, hiking and music. The poems in this publication came from an experience in Paducah in the summer of 2006.

Mandy Haynes has been telling stories since the time she could talk. It began with her imaginary friend, Uncle Wilkensack at the age of three. Haynes works as a cardiac sonographer at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital where she considers herself very fortunate to work with courageous children whom she credits with keeping her imagination alive. Mandy surrounds herself with artistic, creative and fun loving adults, including her 21 year old son, Justin. In her spare time, she enjoys writing poetry, making jewelry and finding obscure music, overlooked by mainstream. She is currently trying her hand at songwriting in hopes of having some cool unheard music of her own some day.

Elizabeth Howard has an M.A. in English from Vanderbilt University. Her work has been published in *Big Muddy*, *Appalachian Journal*, *Wind*, *Poem*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Comstock Review*, *Mobius*, *Hurricane Blues*, and other journals.

Ray Ingram has been a teacher for nearly forty-six years in the secondary and college levels. He has farmed for even longer. Writing has been a hobby, therapy, and a sort of secondary existence as long as he can remember. His home, a farm in

the Lickton Community, is in White's Creek, about ten miles north of Nashville and has been in his family for the better part of a century. He says, "It goes without saying, as you read whatever I write, that I am country in my writing and in my interests. For years I taught American History with a strong American and English Literature influence. All of that time one of my deepest interests have been those stories that have come out of the hills and hollows, and have come down through my family. Happiness for me is found in the Tennessee hill country."

Brad King is an Army veteran and former student at Volunteer State Community College, where he studied art and covered sports for *The Settler*, Volunteer State's student magazine.

John Ludwig, Jr. lives and writes poetry in Dickson, Tennessee.

Leslie Lytle has frequently published poetry in *Number One*, *The Georgia Review*, *The New England Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *The Literary Review*, and many other journals. She has also published several short stories. A nonfiction work, *Execution's Doorstep*, recounting the experiences of five men sentenced to death and later proved innocent, is forthcoming in 2008 from the University Press of New England.

Randy Mackin is an English professor at Middle Tennessee State University.

Andrew Martin was born and raised in Tennessee, and has written since boyhood. He briefly attended community college for Journalism and then left to pursue more fulfilling work. Since then, he has been writing pieces of fiction and recording songs with the group "Midnight Splendor" for the Corps Mort label.

Dan Powers, now retired from the Tennessee Valley Authority, spends most his time fly fishing for trout on his beloved Caney Fork River in middle Tennessee. When he's not fishing, he's tying flies for the next outing. In 2006, Black Greyhound Media published his first full length collection of

poems, *Mighty Good Land*. His current writing project is a collection of poems about the river, the land, and the people of Buffalo Valley where he resides in a river-side cabin with his wife, Cheryl, and their dog and cat. He raises vegetables in a garden "way too big for a guy who wants to be in the river waving a stick" and says his wife makes the best pickled beets in the south.

Jane Sasser has published work in *The Atlanta Review*, *The North American Review*, *The National Forum*, *Sow's Ear*, *Re:Al*, *Byline*, *The Mid-America Poetry Review*, *Snowy Egret*, *Small Pond*, *The North Carolina Literary Review*, and numerous other publications. A high school teacher of English literature, American literature, and creative writing, she lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

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Cynthia Wyatt is an Instructor of English at Volunteer State Community College. Her work has been published in *Chelsea*, *Shenandoah*, the *Nebraska Review*, *River Oak Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Kalliope*, and the *Cumberland Review*. Her work has been awarded the Nebraska Review Prize for Poetry, the Sue Sanie Elkind Prize, and the River Oak Review Prize. She is a professional harpist and works as a recording artist, mostly in the studios of Nashville, Tennessee.

Submissions

Submissions deadline for the 2008 edition is **December 15, 2007**.

If selected, upon publication, you will receive two contributor's copies.

To submit by mail, please include the following:

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- Four copies of each page of work: one copy with your name, three without.
- A cover sheet with your name, address, and a brief biography to be used if your work is selected.
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